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BITTER COLD

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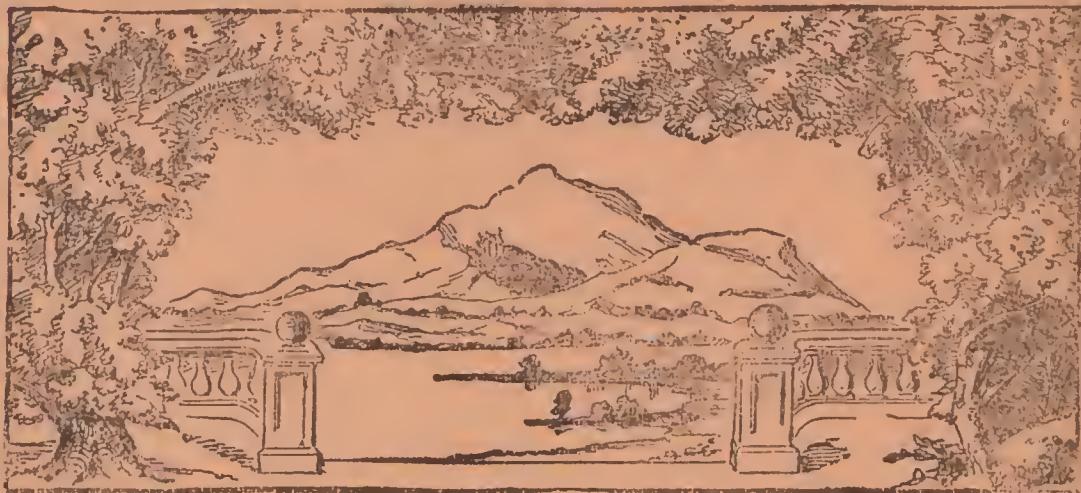
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MRS. SUKEY TOPPLES) MRS. E. YARNOLD
Villagers, &c.

PERIOD 1813 AND 1814.



BITTER COLD

ACT I

SCENE.—R. side view of Farm-house; prominent windows through which is seen the firelight. Beside the window a large holly tree. L. gates leading to Manor House. In back a stile, beyond which, in flat, is a lane leading to village and village church. Snow everywhere, but not falling. Enter from farm several RUSTICS headed by Bob.

BOB. Three cheers for Harry Manvers and his good wife, three cheers, neighbours—A Merry Christmas and God bless them!

SAM. Ay, ay—three cheers, for he be a good man, just like his father—not like the young Squire, who seems to think that poor honest folks be no better than a set of dogs. Three cheers, and loud 'uns let 'em be, neighbours. (three loud hurrahs from RUSTICS. BOB stands on the stile and waves his hat)

BOB. A ringer for the last, boys—a ringer for the last! Enter RALPH, riding whip in hand, by stile, off which he thrusts BOB, who falls to the ground. CHORD.

RALPH. Stand aside, fellow!

Enter HARRY, MARY, and SUKEY hurriedly.

HAR. What is this?

BOB. (rising) The Squire struck me down, farmer, as if I had been a dog.

HAR. Ralph Waters, there is a right of way from this place to the village, and peer or peasant may claim that right.

RALPH. I want no telling from you. The fellow stood in my path and I kicked him aside as I would—(RALPH advances towards HARRY with whip raised. HARRY clenches his fist and assumes an attitude of defiance)

HAR. Squire, you are a mean-spirited coward. A brave youth would protect, not assail old age. I would rather a thousand times be that poor peasant, who toils from sunrise to sunset for his daily bread, than the lord of the proud lands which stretch around us, with a heart as callous as thine own.

RALPH. Dog!

HAR. (fiercely) Oh, beware what you would do, Squire, or a yeoman's arm may teach you to respect those you threaten.

CHARACTERS.

MALES.

HARRY MANVERS (*a young Farmer and proprietor of Holly Bough Farm*) ... MR. T. G. DRUMMOND
RALPH WATERS (*Squire of Bamberry Manor*) MR. E. HARDING
BEN DICKS (*an old Soldier*) MR. W. R. CRAUFORD
TOBY TOPPLES (*The Village Tinker*) MR. J. REYNOLD
BOB WRIGHT (*an aged Rustic*) MR. W. MORTON
SAM SLAP (*a Peasant*) MRS. W. MORTON
Villagers, Rustics, Servants, Officers, &c.

FEMALES.

MARY MANVERS (*the Farmer's Wife*) MISS S. MILES
SUKEY (*Servant at the farm, afterwards*
MRS. SUKEY TOPPLES) MRS. E. YARNOLD
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SAM. Hear, hear !

BOB. Ha, ha, that's right, farmer—that's right.

RALPH. Confusion ! braved by a rustic !

RALPH strikes BOB on the shoulders with his whip. HARRY wrests it from him and flings it over the stile.

HAR. Coward !

RALPH. (striking him) Rascal !

HARRY about to return the blow, when MARY springs between them.

MAR. Hold, Harry, hold—degrade not yourself by quarrelling with one who is unworthy even your scorn.

RALPH, enraged, strikes HARRY over MARY's shoulder. HARRY gently thrusts MARY aside.

HAR. (striking RALPH down) Stand aside, Mary—stand aside ! By Heaven, this is beyond endurance.

MAR. (again interposing) Harry, Harry, for mercy's sake, spare him—heed him not. Let him go his way or his evil nature will find means to do us injury.

HAR. I can deny you nothing, but flesh and blood cannot endure such indignities. (RALPH rises to his feet)

Enter TOBY, who balances himself on the top bar of stile, with a tinker's devil containing live coals in one hand, and a soldering iron in the other. In a drunken attitude.

TOB. What's the matter ? having a fight—go ahead, my boys. Never say die. (dismounts from stile and comes down centre) Knock holes in each other, I'm here, and Toby Topples will soon solder them up again.

TOBY staggers about the stage, drops his fire-pot, and at last prevents himself from falling by clinging round the neck of one of the RUSTICS.

RALPH. Harry Manvers, you shall suffer for this. I will blast your prospects, hunt you from the farm,—drive you forth in the bitter cold world to starve—to starve ! (moves towards gates of the Manor)

HAR. (snapping his fingers) Ha, ha, ha, you forget, Squire, I hold a lease of the homestead, and while I pay my rent you have not the power to do it.

MAR. (pleadingly) Speak not to him, Harry.

HAR. I fear him not for I am an honest man, and can look a squire in the face as well as a peasant.

TOB. (recovering his equilibrium) Bravo, farmer ! them is sentiments as ought to be soldered up for everybody to read. You hear that, neighbours ? It ought to open your hearts, for I'm blest if it ain't gone and made the very snow melt into tears. (points to fire-pan)

MAR. (*clinging to HARRY*) Oh, Harry! come away and leave him. Too well do I know his evil nature. He would be but too glad of any excuse to do you harm. Already he has sworn to blight our happiness. And for what? Because I refused to listen to his odious suit—because I linked my fate with yours—preferred to share the fortunes of a poor but honest man to those of a wealthy libertine.

RALPH. (*furiously*) You have struck me, Harry Manvers, and I will be avenged! Your wife spoke truly; I have sworn to blight your happiness, and beggar your prospects. You have been a serpent in my path, for you married the woman I had marked out for my own. I never forget nor forgive an injury. You have made me your enemy, and shall yet find me a bitter and deadly foe! (*Exit RALPH through gates of Manor*)

TOB. (*staggering after him*) Stop, Squire, stop! Do you hear, you son of a gun? Stop, I say, or I'll solder you to your own gate-post. (*TOBY reaches the gate of the Manor, and falls.* CHORD. *HARRY raises him up from the snow*)

HAR. Why, Toby you are tipsy again.

TOB. You are wrong, farmer, I'm as sober as a judge—ain't I, Sukey?

SU. Oh, dear! (*aside*) The farmer will be so angry.

HAR. I am sorry to see you give way to this fatal vice. Depend upon it, Toby, sooner or later you will have cause to repent it.

SU. I repent it now, for the farmer won't let him court me to-night—Oh, dear!

TOB. It's all owing to Christmas, farmer. I ain't drunk, I'm only tired. There's been such a lot of pots to mend in case the puddings should fall through the holes.

HAR. Ah, Toby, it's different sort of pots to those you have been called upon to mend which have made you in this state.

TOB. Never mind, farmer, it's Christmas Eve and I couldn't resist the temptation of giving you a call just to see if you wanted any soldering done, and wish you a Merry Christmas. (*HARRY takes hold of TOBY's arms and looks in his face.* TOBY and SUKEY make motions to each other)

HAR. Toby, you can't deceive me. I know the object of your coming here to-night, and had you come ere you paid a visit to the ale-house, I had given you a generous welcome. But I tell you, Toby, I feel it my duty to stop your courting our Sukey. She's a good girl, and it would be a fearful thing for her to wed a drunkard. I tell you, Toby, as I have told you

before, that so long as the girl remains beneath my roof, I will do all that I can to save her from destruction. (TOBY seizes his fire-pot, and walks towards the stile)

TOB. Then you won't let me speak to her, farmer? I tell you what, I have a trade at my fingers' ends, and I could keep her better than many in the county.

HAR. (waving off SUKEY, and again seizing TOBY) Toby, you believe me your enemy; I am your friend, and the friend, too, of that poor orphan girl. Forsake the pot, and you shall ever be welcome at the farm. Become a sober man, and I will do all I can to make you and Sukey happy. Take my hand; don't leave me in anger. Get sober, think over what I have said, and then ask yourself if I am not your friend.

TOB. (extending his hand) Give me your fist, Harry, your heart is soldered in the right place. I'll get sober, and then—

HAR. Why then, there will be none more welcome at Holly Bough Farm than Toby Topples, the village tinker. So good night, neighbours—a Merry Christmas to you all. (HARRY waves his hat to VILLAGERS, who exit over stile followed by TOBY, who pauses and motions to SUKEY, as he stands on the bars. Exit SUKEY into farm. HARRY lays his arm on MARY's shoulder and she starts. HARRY points to gates) Why, Mary, surely you do not mean to let this scene pass you.

MAR. Oh, Harry, what has happened this night has saddened me. It will turn what I believed to be a happy Christmas into a wretched one.

HAR. Why so?

MAR. (pointing to gates) I fear that man.

HAR. Why should you fear him? am I not here to protect you?

MAR. True, but you know he sought my love.

HAR. Yes, but you gave it to me.

MAR. I did, for you deserved it. Still my refusal to his suit has embittered him towards us. I can not tell why, but I dread some evil. Oh Harry, my heart tells me to-morrow will be a sad day for me, and I cannot stifle its whisperings.

HAR. Come, come, Mary, I will make you happy in spite of yourself. What, be sad at this jovial season? No, no, we will banish the silly feeling. We will decorate the walls of the old farm with the holly and the mistletoe and be gay and happy spite of all the squires in England. (leads her up to the holly tree. Here, Mary, I'll cut a few branches from the old holly tree and you shall carry them into the farm. (takes a knife from his pocket, and seizes a bough) Here is a beautiful bough.

See how thickly the berries cluster on it. (*severs the bunch, shakes the snow over him, and gives it to MARY. Is about to sever another but drops his knife*) There, I have lost my knife. Shake the snow off the bough, Mary, while I look for it. (*starts*) Why, girl, how pale you look—you are shivering. Give me the holly—I will carry it in. I had forgotten it was freezing so hard, and that the fire-side was more suitable for you than the cold night air. It's bitter cold—run along or I shall think you are frozen. (*Exit HARRY and MARY R into farm*)

Enter at stile TOBY TOPPLES on top bar of which he remains swinging the fire-pot in his hand.

TOB. I'm drunk, I know I'm drunk, but I can't help it, and if I am drunk, I know what Sukey meant. She will wait for me at the back of the farm, and cheer the heart of Toby Topples with a kiss of her pretty lips. I'll solder myself up a bit, so here goes. (*TOBY dismounts from stile. Enter SUKEY, R.*)

SU. Oh, dear me, what a thing it is to be in love. (*sees TOBY and screams affectedly.*) My Toby—oh, my tinker! (*TOBY sets down the fire-pot and they rush into each other's arms, embrace, and SUKEY raises her face covered with black*)

TOB. Sukey, your Toby would see you in spite of twenty farmers.

SU. (*in loud whisper*) Oh, I'm so glad you are come back. But, Toby dear, you have been drinking again, and you know that Farmer Manvers says you shan't come and court me if you get drunk.

TOB. (*staggering*) I ain't drunk; it's love that makes me so unsteady; it's my heart thumping against my breast when I look upon your pretty face, that knocks me first on one side and then on the other.

SU. There, do come into the kitchen. Don't make a noise for Farmer to hear you or he'll be so angry. Come and sit down by the nice warm fire. Oh, I've got such a beautiful hot cake for you.

TOB. Well, you are a good girl! Ah, Sukey! it's an awful thing not to have a nice fire, and something hot to go to, when you have done your day's work—not to have a pretty, kind, little darling to welcome you after toiling all day in the bitter cold.

SU. Yes, Toby; but you would never come home to the cheerful fire and nice supper if you had any one to get them ready for you; you are too fond of the ale-house, Toby.

TOB. There, you don't understand it! I go to the alehouse because there's no pretty smiling face to welcome me home.

SU. And if you had—

TOB. I'd solder myself to my own hearthstone.

SU. Oh, he, he ! it's bitter cold ! Do come in ; the farmer and his wife won't see you if you go round to the back. Come in and have a warm but don't make a noise. (TOBY takes up his fire-pot and exits with SUKEY, R.)

Enter RALPH through gates, and crosses to window of farm, through which he stands gazing for a few moments.

RALPH. (bitterly) So he is decorating the walls with the holly. Curse him ! he could not have chosen a better time to cross my path, for the news of my father's illness urged me to tell him the hatred I bear him. I shall soon be, if I am not so already, the master of this proud manor, yet words contained in my father's last letter haunt me—were impressed upon my mind when I hurled the rustic from my path. Bah ! they can mean nothing. (again looks at window) There she sits. Little does she dream of my presence ; little does she suspect that night after night my eyes are feasting on her beauty—she is too beautiful to be the wife of that rustic. Fool to refuse the honour I would have conferred upon her ! She scorned the heart that now only pants for vengeance on her plodding husband. I will plot and plan to crush her proud soul, to bring her and the man whose love she preferred to mine to beggary and disgrace. He holds a lease of the farm, but once assured of my parent's death—a father I never knew—and I will find some flaw by which I can turn them from the old homestead out into the bitter cold world to starve ! What's this ? (RALPH stoops and picks up HARRY's knife. As he holds it up to examine it, enter BEN DICKS off the stile, and comes down, c. RALPH places the knife on the fence before farm, and turns towards DICKS and starts)

DICKS. (buffetting his hands) It's bitter cold, sir—bitter cold.

RALPH. (sarcastically) Generally is at this season of the year.

DICKS. You are right, sir, but young blood and a familiarity with the climate enables you to bear it better than I. The man over whose head an Indian sun has shone for near twenty years may be pardoned if he can scarcely bear such bitter cold.

RALPH. (again starting) Have you been in India ?

DICKS. Yes, sir, until four or five months since.

RALPH. And in the army, if I may judge from your costume.

DICKS. Aye, sir, and in the army.

RALPH. (anxiously) Did you know a Colonel Waters ?

DICKS. (raising his cap) God bless him ! Know my old Colonel ?—aye, well !

RALPH. Tell me, is he dead?—is he dead?

DICKS. You appear anxious to learn, yet I should scarce think you could have known him. But he is dead.

RALPH. (*joyfully*) Hurrah! His son then is master of Bam-berry Manor.

DICKS. (*sharply*) Who says so? Do you know his son? If you do you know a libertine and a scoundrel, and if he be a friend of yours, cut his acquaintance.

RALPH. (*aside*) I must learn his mission here before I make him acquainted with whom I am. (*aloud*) What is there to prevent the person of whom you speak inheriting the Manor and broad lands, when he is the only son?

DICKS. True, he is the only son, but Ben Dicks—and that is me—for eighteen years servant to Colonel Waters, can prevent him claiming a single foot of the vast estates.

RALPH. Ah, how?

DICKS. (*curtly*) That's my business. And now, young man, be good enough to inform me if that be Holly Bough Farm.

RALPH. (*anxiously*) Do you want anybody at Holly Bough Farm?

DICKS. I should not have sought it if I hadn't. I want to find a Mrs. Manvers, for I have news for her that will gladden her heart on this cold Christmas Eve.

RALPH. From Colonel Waters?—from India?

DICKS. I didn't say so.

RALPH. But the Colonel's son—

DICKS. I want nothing of him—I have heard of him, and that's enough for either me or my business. I seek only the person I have named. Is this her dwelling?

RALPH. (*aside*) What business can he have with her? I must know more, and to do so must prevent him meeting her or her husband. (*aloud*) Holly Bough Farm lies on the other side of the village.

DICKS. Why, I was directed here.

RALPH. Then you were directed wrong.

DICKS. Well, there is no help for it. I must march back, for find her to-night I am bound.

RALPH. Why not to-morrow?

DICKS. Because I always obey orders. The packet must reach her to-night.

RALPH. (*aside*) Ah, a packet—it must never reach her till I have learned its contents. (*aloud*) Won't you step into my house and rest yourself for a time? you are cold and evidently tired.

DICKS. I am both, but duty before rest. When I have done my duty I will seek the warm hearth of some friendly inn. Good-night. (*going towards stile*)

RALPH. (*quickly*) Stay, if you will not accept rest and refreshment, at least let me offer a glass of brandy to warm you this bitter cold night.

DICKS. Then you must be sharp in getting it, for I have stayed too long already. (*RALPH crosses to gates, DICKS to window, and stands buffetting his arms*)

RALPH. (*aside*) Is it possible that I am not the inheritor of my father's wealth? For years I have looked upon these broad lands as my own, and shall they go to another? It must not be. If the old man has in his possession that which can rob me of my expectations, I will tear them from him. He knows me not, and, by Heaven, I will know all—the worst—the worst! I have prevented him seeking her there. Would I could prevail on him to enter the Manor, but I will know his secret yet, and—I feel it here—my fate. (*places his hand on his breast and exit through gates of Manor, DICKS looking in window of farm*)

DICKS. Ah, there's no place like home. It's full eighteen years since I sat in a place like that. Ugh! it's bitter cold, and the sight of that cheerful fireside is almost enough to tempt me from my duty. No, no, Ben Dicks, you will obey the last command of your old Colonel before you seek your own comfort. The other side of the village, then, after all, is the farm I seek. It is too bad when the weary and footsore are sent out of their way by a foolish jester. No matter, I have suffered many greater hardships than retracing my steps a mile. (*HARRY appears at the window and draws the blind across it*) Ah, they have shut out the prettiest sight I have gazed upon since I left my native land eighteen years agone. (*DICKS walks up and down, buffetting his hands. Re-enter through gates RALPH with a tumbler in his hand*)

RALPH. (*aside*) The old man will drink—here is a weapon will pierce the heart and let out the dearest secret. Ere he has reached the middle of the lane insensibility will render him powerless to prevent me learning all. (*crosses to DICKS and continues aloud*) This at least will warm your blood, which must be near frozen, and give you renewed strength to pursue your journey in the bitter cold.

DICKS. (*taking the glass*) Well, sir, here's a Merry Christmas to you, and confusion to the fellow who sent me so far out of my way. (*drinks*) It's a drop of good stuff, and courses through an old man's veins like a stream of pleasure. Many thanks, sir! (*gives RALPH the glass*) It is indeed acceptable on such a bitter cold night as this. Just beyond the church, you said, lay Holly Bough Farm. (*going*)

RALPH. Cross the stile—keep along the lane—bear round to the left of the church, and you will find the place you seek.

DICKS. Good-night then ; for one scorched for near twenty years by the sun of India can ill stand this bitter cold.

RALPH. (crossing to gates) Good-night. (aside) Now to change my dress and follow him. Ha, ha ! old man, you carry a secret, whose weight I will soon relieve you of ! aye, ere one-half that narrow lane shall hold your footprints. (Exit RALPH, through gates. DICKS places his hand on the stile, hesitates, clasps his forehead in his hand, and comes down c.)

DICKS. What strange feeling is this ? my brain swims—a film seems to be gathering over my eyes, and my limbs tremble, but not with cold. Great Heaven ! what can this mean ? I can scarcely see, hardly breathe. Merciful powers ! can it be possible that this man is the son of my old Colleague, and this the farm I seek ? Have I revealed my trust to him and been drugged—poisoned ? Have I placed my life in jeopardy by my foolish tongue ? The place swims round—I can scarcely stand—the farm—Ah, Heaven, I cannot reach it—my limbs are frozen or dead—Oh, my head ! my heart ! (places his hand on his breast) Ah ! the packet—that I was to confide to her. Oh, fool, fool ! I see it all. I have been drugged that he may obtain it ; where can I conceal it ? In the snow ? No, no ! that will melt and reveal it to him. Oh, that I could reach the door of the farm ! Oh, that I could hide it somewhere till this fit has passed away ! Is there no place ere insensibility renders me powerless to shield it. (staggers towards window of farm) Heaven give me strength to reach it, or shew me some place to conceal the paper I swore at the death-bed of my poor Colonel to place in no other hands but hers. I can go no further ! Great Heaven, guard that which I am powerless to shield. (grasps at the holly tree to save himself from falling) Ah, the Great Commander has heard the prayer of the old soldier, and placed beneath my hand a receptacle for that treasure I would, as a true man, so faithfully guard. This hollow between the branches will hold the packet. Ha, ha, ha ! I will foil him yet—I will foil him yet ! (DICKS supports himself by clinging to the holly-tree with one hand, whilst with the other he takes a paper from his bosom and places it in the hollow of the tree) It is safe ! Ha, ha, ha ! (DICKS staggers and falls c. Re-enter from gates, RALPH, differently attired, and his face partially concealed by a large scarf. Hurries towards stile, but stops short on perceiving the prostrate DICKS)

RALPH. So soon ! Confound it ! I wish he had crossed the stile ere he fell. But no matter, they have drawn the blind over the window and there are none to see me. Now to possess myself of any document he may have in his possession—now to save my inheritance. (RALPH drops on one knee be-

side DICKS, and thrusts his hand into his breast. DICKS grasps his arm)

DICKS. Villain ! What would you do ?

RALPH. Save my inheritance. I am Ralph Waters, and by all the furies I will tear from you any paper or deed that can do me harm. Where are they ? I will have them, I swear it !

DICKS. (struggling to rise) By all my hopes you shall not. I never yet disobeyed commands, never failed in my duty, never surrendered a trust to an honourable foe, and curse me if I do so to a villain ! I am old and weak, my blood has been poisoned by your accursed hands, but while one atom of strength and breath remains I'll fight for that entrusted to my care. When Ben Dicks meets his old commander in Heaven, he must say he obeyed his last order, and did his duty as a man and as a Christian. (DICKS regains his feet, and they struggle to the window of the farm. RALPH's hat falls off)

RALPH. (fiercely) Give me any paper you have for Mary Manvers.

DICKS. Never ! (RALPH takes the knife from the fence and raises it above his head)

RALPH. Old man, I swear to have the secret you possess. Give it, or die !

DICKS. Would you murder me ?

RALPH. I would save my inheritance, even at the price of blood. Your words have told me you hold the means to destroy me. Yield them, or die !

DICKS. Never would I do so to a brave man, and trebly never to a coward and an assassin !

RALPH. Then by this means do I possess them. Fool, your blood be on your own head. (stabs DICKS, who falls, c.)

DICKS. O viper !

RALPH. (flinging down knife) That cry will arouse the inmates of the farm. I must be quick—quick ! (flings himself on his knees beside DICKS)

DICKS. Ha, ha ! villain, you are foiled ! I have no paper—it—is—is—

RALPH. Where ?

DICKS. Where it will one day rise in evidence against you. Coward ! murderer ! I have foiled you, and done my duty.

(falls back, apparently dead)

RALPH. (springing to his feet) I must fly or it will be too late. Confusion ! someone comes.

Enter TOBY hurriedly, R., with his red-hot soldering iron in right hand and pot in left, and runs towards stile. RALPH springs to his feet, and they knock against each other.

TOBY strikes RALPH on forehead and leaps over the stile and exit. RALPH hurriedly seizes his hat and exit by gates. Enter, r., HARRY, MARY, SUKEY, and several RUSTICS with lanterns)

HAR. Whence could that cry have proceeded ? It appeared to come from this spot.

SU. (aside, looking nervously towards the stile) Oh dear, I don't see him. I'm so glad he's gone away before Farmer discovered him. (HARRY takes a lantern from a RUSTIC and walks slowly down c., followed by MARY, SUKEY, and RUSTICS; sees DICKS and starts.

HAR. Holloa ! What is this ? A man lying in the snow ! (HARRY holds lantern down and OMNES gather round. Re-enter from gate RALPH and several SERVANTS—RALPH in first costume. SERVANTS join the throng)

RALPH. (aside) I must be firm—curse the blow, how it burns ! The fellow knew me not, though I knew him. (aloud) What is the meaning of all this ?

HAR. (to his wife) Some poor fellow pierced, doubtless, by cold and hunger. Take the lantern, Mary, I will carry him into the farm ; the warmth may soon revive him.

MAR. He is an old soldier by his dress, perhaps wandering houseless in the bitter cold. Run some of you and put some more logs on the fire. Poor fellow ! (HARRY partially raises DICKS, then lets him fall back again, and clutches MARY's arm)

HAR. There is blood on his bosom. Great Heaven ! there has been murder !

OMNES. Murder !

HAR. (again stooping). Yes, murder, foul murder ! See, he has been stabbed, and the blood has dyed the pure white snow to red. Search some of you—search ! The murderer cannot be far off.

RALPH. (aside, pressing his hat down low) I must be firm, or I shall be discovered.

MAR. (picking up knife) Aye, truly, Harry, there has been murder. Here is the weapon by which he has met his death. 'Tis stained with blood, wet blood. (HARRY takes the knife. RALPH starts. OMNES close round)

HAR. (starting) Great Heaven, as I live 'tis my knife !

MAR. Your knife !

RALPH. His knife ! (aside) Ah, ah, now for my revenge. (one of the SERVANTS snatches the knife from HARRY, and examines it, and gives it to RALPH)

SERVANT. Yes, Squire, it's the farmer's knife ; there is "H. M." cut on the handle.

RALPH. Seize him ! He spoke truly when he said the murderer was not far off. This knife betrays the assassin.

Seize the murderer of the poor old man. (MARY drops the lantern, and flings herself upon HARRY's neck)

MAR. (wildly) He, my husband - my Harry, a murderer?

RALPH. Ay, e ! thy husband, a murderer. Behold the evidence of his guilt—evidence that will hang him as sure as this is Christmas Eve.

MAR. Harry ! Harry !—(the SERVANTS seize HARRY, and tear MARY from him; she falls into the arms of SUKEY; the RUSTICS shrink back)

HAR. Friends, do not shrink from me. This is some foul plot of that infernal villain. I am innocent of this crime, so help me Heaven !

RALPH. Convey him to gaol. Let the body be conveyed into the farm to await an inquest, and I, who can sympathise with his poor wife, will take her under my especial care. Away with him to gaol—to gaol ! (SERVANTS bear HARRY backwards to the stile. Snow falls)

HAR. Villain ! accursed villain ! I am innocent. Oh, my poor wife—my poor wife !

TABLEAU. HARRY guarded by the SERVANTS before the stile. SUKEY supporting MARY, R. RALPH pointing towards the village, L. RUSTICS, R. and L. of DICKS, C. Bells ringing the Christmas chimes. DROP.

END OF ACT I.

ACT II.

SCENE.—Same as before, except no firelight is seen through window of farm. Snow falling. The bells ringing the Christmas chimes. A lapse of one year supposed to have taken place.

Enter slowly from farmhouse, R., MARY; pauses before window.

MAR. Twelve months, twelve wretched, weary months have passed since that fatal night when Harry severed the bough which hangs dry and withered on the wall. Oh, what have I suffered since that time—what must he have suffered too ! Surely Heaven has deserted us, or his innocence ere this would have been proclaimed to the world. Oh, what a wreck in one short year has become this once happy home ! Ralph Waters, you have indeed kept your oath. You have consigned us both to misery—he with the brand of felon on his brow, I a beggar without one friend in the bitter cold world. (MARY clasps her hands over her eyes)

Enter RALPH from gates, L. Sees her, starts, and crosses to her side. MARY looks up and retreats a few steps.

RALPH. Weeping ?

MAR. You here, Ralph Waters, you ! Oh Heaven, have you come to gloat on my misery ; come to smile on the wreck you have made ; feast your base soul on my agony ? Have you come to revel in the change of one short year, the work of your own black heart ?

RALPH. You do me wrong, Mary.

MAR. (*indignantly*) Mrs. Manvers, sir.

RALPH. (*sarcastically*) As you please. I thought the name would have been distasteful to you since it is borne by a murderer.

MAR. Villain, villain ! have I not suffered enough ? Is not your revengeful nature yet satiated ? Can your baseness still go further ? I am the wife of no murderer, but of a true and honest man.

RALPH. You forget the circumstances of last Christmas Eve—

MAR. Forget them ?—wou'd to Heaven that I could. But you—you know that he is innocent. The bloody knife fell from his grasp, and was lost in the snow, when he severed a branch of that holly tree. You did not believe him guilty, but your wicked nature prompted you to accuse him of the fearful deed, that you might be revenged upon us.

RALPH. Bah ! there could be no doubt of his guilt, and, instead of fretting about him, you ought to feel happy that, by some mysterious means, the body of the murdered man was removed ere a coroner's inquest had been held. That strange circumstance saved him from the gallows. I have little fear of its being discovered now, and so Harry Manvers will escape the rope, though he will doubtless end his days in prison. Come, I always looked upon you as a sensible girl. Harry is lost to you for ever ; then why make your existence miserable ? You say that I am here to gloat over your misery. I am not. In the vain hope to release your husband you have beggared yourself. Listen to me : the lease you hold is worthless, for you cannot pay your rent, and there are none will lend you the means to do so. You know that I love you—would protect you. Harry is lost to you ; forget him, throw yourself on my protection, and I will change your misery to happiness—your poverty to wealth and splendour—your tears to smiles. (*attempts to seize her hand*) Consent to be mine, and you—

MAR. (*starting back*) Hold, miscreant, hold ! What ! become the mistress of my bitterest foe—the accuser of the innocent ! Never, never !

RALPH. Beware ! Think what you do !

MAR. I know what I do. I spurn the reptile whose venomous sting has poisoned the peace and happiness of a

cheerful home. Become thine ! Never ! Were that loved husband guilty, I would still be to him a true and honest wife. Go ! leave me, and the curse of an insulted and injured woman rest upon your head. I am poor, wretched, and broken-hearted, but were the clouds of adversity a thousand times as dense, I would still cling to the man I love—still keep sacred my marriage vow !

RALPH. Mary Manvers, to-morrow the rent of this farm is due ; see that you are prepared to pay it on the following morning. The wife of an assassin has no claim to a landlord's indulgence, and you have but one claim on mine. Be prepared either with the money, or your consent to my proposal, or, by Heaven, I hurl you forth from the farm to beg—to starve in the bitter cold ! (Exit RALPH through gates. MARY sinks upon her knees, c. Bells commence the chimes)

MAR. (*listening*) Is this but another mockery of my misery ? The bells seem to ring the words of tidings of comfort and joy, but not for me—not for me ! Never more will this seared heart know comfort and joy ; they have fled for ever, and left me to misery and despair. And now the last bitter trial has come. I must leave the old homestead, I will not wait to be turned from it by the villain who has plotted our destruction. I will go to-night, whither I know not—care not—anywhere anywhere through the bitter cold. (rises and exit r. into farm)

Enter TOBY and SUKEY, preposterously wrapped up, at back of stile, c., TOBY bearing in his hand the fire-pot, on the top of which are two plates, one over the other. TOBY beats the snow off the top rail of the stile with his apron, and lifts over the pot.

TOB. I'll get over first, Mrs. Topples, my dear, and then I can help you. It's so slippery that I nearly upset the wittles and scalded my fingers with the gravy. Lor ! how happy I do feel that we have got such a nice warm supper to offer her. Poor thing, she must take on mighty hard about Harry not even to care to get a bit of grub for herself. But it ain't in human natur to let her starve either with or agin her will, is it, Sukey Topples, my dear ?

SU. It's not in our nature, Toby. (TOBY gets over the stile and assists SUKEY to follow)

TOB. Not a bit of it. (both stoop and warm their hands by the fire)

SU. Oh, ho, ho ! It's bitter cold, Toby—I'm frozen to death. I know I am, and you'll have to melt me !

TOB. Well, it is cold, but I don't feel it much. You take this comforter, for blow me if I like a blanket round my

neck. (TOBY takes the comforter from his neck, and ties it round SUKEY's, finishing the operation with a kiss)

SU. That warms me, Toby.

TOB. There, you go in and take the wittles, and I'll stay here and look after the fire. I don't like to go in myself, for I can't abear to look upon her pale face and think that but for the drink I could have saved her husband by recognising the murderer. I marked him with my soldering iron, and should know him again if we ever met. I do wish I could run across him, I only do, that's all.

SU. I wish I knew what became of the old soldier ; that's what puzzles me.

TOB. Don't you think you had better make haste and take in the wittles, and ask the poor cretur to come and dine with us to-morrow ? only mind how you do it, so as not to hurt her feelings.

SU. Toby !

TOB. My dear.

SU. There ought not to be any secrets with married people, ought there ?

TOB. Secrets ! I should say not.

SU. Then do explain the disappearance of the old soldier. I'm sure you can ; now do, there's a dear. I'll never tell anybody.

TOB. Well, Sukey, it would ease my mind to tell you. You know I was drunk last Christmas Eve—I ain't been drunk since, and never will be again. When I heard all about poor Harry Manvers being accused of the crime it sobered me, and it struck me that if the body could be stolen away before the inquest it would save him. Certain of his innocence, I stole the body and carried it down to the beach, placed it in a boat, and sent it adrift—I had not the heart to throw it into the sea. I watched the boat till the blinding snow hid it from my view, and then went home, resolved never to get drunk again. It saved Harry from the gallows, if not from a prison, and his poor wife from perhaps death. Hush ! see, there she comes. Let us stand back and watch her. What can she want out in this bitter cold ?

Enter MARY, r., habited in bonnet and shawl; comes down c., turns and gazes up at the farm. The village waits in distance playing "Home, sweet Home."

MARY. Ah, I must leave you for ever—the only home I have ever known—the spot where all my girlhood's days have been passed—the scene of my love, my hopes, my joys—leave thee in sorrow and sadness, to go Heaven only knows where, through the bitter cold. (hears the waits) Home, home ! I have no home now. Villainy drives me

from it into the bitter cold world. Never more shall I know what home is. Oh, wretched as it has become, I cannot leave it. (*sinks on the ground*) Here, in sight of that once sweet home, let me die—let me die! (*TOBY and SUKEY come forward. SUKEY kneels down beside MARY and throws her arms round her neck; MARY starts*)

SU. Oh, my poor missus, my poor missus! (*SUKEY and MARY rise*)

MAR. Who are you that come to gloat over my misery? leave me to my wretchedness.

TOB. If we do may I be soldered to my own devil! Mrs Manvers, it's me and Sukey.

SU. Yes, ma'am, it's me and Toby, only me and Toby.

MAR. I know, I know, but oh, leave me to my misery.

SU. (*taking her arm*) Come in out of the cold, come home

MAR. Home, home—I have no home! no place of shelter, no place of rest, but the snow-covered earth. Home! I have left it for ever, to wander till death soothes my sufferings in the bitter cold.

TOB. (*seizing her wrist*) No, no, Toby Toppl's has got a heart in his bosom if it is covered with a dirty leather apron, and if the old homestead can no longer be a shelter for you, the cot of the village tinker shall.

MAR. No, Toby, I will not be a burden on others. I know and feel your kindness, but you are poor, and could ill afford to succour the wife of a felon.

TOB. (*fiercely*) It's a damned lie to say that Harry Manvers is a felon! Suspicion rests on his head, but the blood of the old soldier stains not his hand or heart!

MAR. Bless you, Toby—bless you for those words!

TOB. A curse on the man who says he is guilty. I would thrust my soldering iron down his villainous throat, and burn out his lying heart. Come, it is bitter cold—come into the farm. We have brought you something warm, because we knew you wasn't well. Do come—do—do!

MAR. No, my kind friends, no! I have left the old farm for ever. I was taking my last look upon it when you arrived. Now I must go, whither I know not—care not.

TOB. But I do. Farmer Manvers was the best friend I ever had, and it ain't likely but I'll do my duty towards his wife. I tell you there is room enough in my little cot, and it will be only a few hours' extra work to provide for another. You shan't go anywhere else, I tell you, you must come home with me and Sukey.

MAR. Why, why should I be a burden to you?

TOB. I can bear it easily, for a fellow's heart is always

lighter and happier when he feels that he acts as a man and as a Christian.

SU. Oh, do come. I shall be so happy to he'p you who aided me, a poor orphan girl. There, Toby, ~~s~~ ~~e~~ will come home with us, I know she will. Hold the fire ~~close~~ so as to warm her, for she is cold—so very cold.

MAR. (wavering) Kind, generous friends, how can I thank you?

TOB. (holding up the fire) There, warm your hands over the fire, and then take hold of my arm and Sukey's arm and bear all your weight upon us, and we will go home to supper; it's keeping so nice and hot between the plates, and as you won't go into the farm to eat it, and it's too cold to eat it here, it won't hurt till we get home. Then come along. (TOBY and SUKEY attempt to lead her to stile)

MAR. Heaven reward you for this! (stops and turns to farm) Let me look once upon th' old farm ere I leave it for ever. Never more shall I sit at the window and watch the birds as they hop and chirp amid the boughs of that old holly tree. Harry so loved to cut and tend it, but oh, it was a fatal branch he severed last Christmas Eve. It hangs dry and withered on the wall now. I will pluck a sprig to keep as a memento of the old place, then turn my back upon it for ever.

TOB. I'll snap off a large branch and we'll take it home and see if we can't make it grow in the little garden. There, stand close to the fire, I'll soon have a bough off the old tree. (TOBY goes to the tree and seizes one of the branches, shakes the snow over him and the racket drops to the ground at his feet; he stoops, picks it up) Holloa, what is this!

MAR. A packet.

SU. A letter.

TOB. It be frozen, but the fire will soon melt it. (turns it about by the fire) There be writing on it, Mrs. Manvers. I be no scholar. I'll stir the fire in' o a blaze, and you can tell us what it be about. (TOBY hands the letter to MARY, takes the plates off the fire with his apron, stirs it with his soldering iron, and holds up the pot to throw a light on the paper. Re-enter RALPH by gate, who starts upon seeing them, and crosses and hides behind holly tree without being seen and listens)

MAR. (in surprise) Good heavens, what is this? My own name—Ah!

TOB. What is it?

SU. Oh, do read it!

MAR. (reading) "My own loved daughter,—A repentant father, on his death-bed, anxious to do an act of justice, here solemnly avers that Mary Waters, better known as

Mary Manvers, is the legitimate heiress of Bamberry Manor, I, Charles Waters, having married in the year 1790 a poor girl, Mary White, which union was kept secret from my friends, they being averse to the same. The child placed in the charge of Robert Manvers, and afterwards espoused to his son, I swear to be the only offspring of that union. Two years after my marriage with Mary Waters, under threats of disinheritance I led to the altar, whilst Mary still lived, Mildred Craven, who in the due course of time gave birth to a son, whom we called Ralph. Disgusted at my own infamy, I obtained a commission in the East India service, and left England for ever. Both of the unfortunate women I espoused being dead, and myself dying, I make this statement in order that justice may be done, and in the hope that I may obtain forgiveness for my sins.—Your father, CHARLES WATERS." Great heavens ! I the heiress of Bamberry Manor ?

TOB. (*capering about*) Hurrah, hurrah !

SU. Oh, it takes my breath away !

MAR. Heiress of Bamberry Manor ! and this packet must have been concealed in the holly by the murdered soldier ! I cannot feel happy at the knowledge so strangely discovered.

TOB. Not happy ?

MAR. No, how can I feel happy while my husband lies in a felon's cell ? This cannot bring me happiness, though it save me the old farm and bring me the broad lands of Bamberry. RALPH dashes forward, and tears the letter from MARY's grasp.

RALPH. Never shall otherthan myself possess them—never—never ! (*TOBY drops the fire-pot, springs upon RALPH, and seizes him by the throat*)

TOB. Villain, I will tear that paper from you, though blood-stain the white snow again on this Christmas Eve !

RALPH. And I will defend it with my life. (*they struggle across the stage ; RALPH's hat falls off, and TOBY is hurled backwards*)

TOB. Ah, now do I know the real murderer of the old soldier. (*points to RALPH*) Behold the assassin ! I can swear to him by the brand on his brow (*seizes his soldering iron*) This is the iron that marked him. Ralph Waters, the secret is now out. The soldier was murdered by you to save your property, but the gallows shall be your portion Drop that paper, or, by the Heaven above us, I will bury this heated iron in your body, and avenge the sufferings of Harry Manvers. (*RALPH retreats to stile, takes a pistol from his breast and levels it at TOBY. SUKEY flings herself upon her husband to hield him*)

RALPH. Fool, do you imagine I am so weak as to yield that which can rob me of these broad lands ? Are you so mad as to imagine that the assertions of a drunken tinker will have any weight against the word of the Squire of Bamberry ? This secret must perish—this evidence be destroyed. Advance one step to oppose me and I will stretch you dead at my feet !

TOB. Though a tinker I am a man—a true, honst man, and it is not a villain's threats that shall prevent me doing an act of justice. I will tear that paper from your grasp, or perish in the attempt !

SU. (*holding him back*) Oh, Toby—Toby ! (RALPH places one foot on bottom bar of the stile and waves the paper above his head)

RALPH. Not only will I remain lord of Bamberry Manor, but crush those who dare dispute my title. Mary Manvers, your happiness is but short-lived—you are again a houseless wanderer—your husband a felon—the suspected murderer of the old soldier.

Enter BEN DICKS back of stile ; springs on its bars and grasps RALPH's throat with one hand and the pistol with the other.

DICKS. Liar ! (RALPH and DICKS struggle. DICKS is hurled to the stage, but gets the pistol. RALPH again places one foot on the stile as if to cross it)

RALPH. Against all comers do I hold it. Ralph Waters surrenders it only with life.

Enter HARRY MANVERS back of stile. HARRY tears the paper from RALPH's hand and strikes him backwards, then leaps over the stile, and seizes RALPH by the throat.

HAR. Accursed villain ! once more do we meet face to face. (MARY clasps her hands. DICKS leaps to his feet)

MAR. Harry, my husband ! oh, Heaven !

TOB. and SU. Farmer Manvers !

DICKS. Look to your wife and leave the villain to me. (DICKS holds the pistol to RALPH's head. HARRY and MARY rush into each other's arms)

HAR. My own, my loved Mary !

DICKS. So, Ralph Craven—for a bastard has no claim to his father's name—you are foiled at last.

RALPH. (*in terror*) Can the grave give up its dead ?

TOB. Do the waves disgorge their victims ?

DICKS. Well may you ask, well may you tremble. You thought yourself secure, but the guilty never escape. Providence, sooner or later, unbinds the eyes of justice, rewards the innocent, and punishes the guilty. For this work it has

preserved me. A year since this very night, to possess a paper entrusted to me by your father on his death-bed, you plunged a knife into my breast on this very spot. To shield yourself from the consequences of that crime, you accused an innocent man. The evidence was strong against him, for it was with his knife you struck the blow. The paper for which you sinned escaped your grasp, and your crime brought you no reward. Now a prison will be your portion. Hither come the officers of justice, and instead of retaining the proud estates of Bamberry Manor, a felon's home and a felon's doom await you. (*enter OFFICERS and VILLAGERS over the stile*)

RALPH. Mercy! mercy!

MAR. Oh, Harry—Harry, am I dreaming, or have my sufferings driven me mad? Speak, let me hear your voice, my own—my husband!

HAR. Be calm, Mary, it is indeed Harry who clasps you once more to his bosom—presses you to that heart which yearns only for you.

MAR. Great Heaven, I thank thee! Oh Harry, that base, bad man! (*pointing to RALPH*)

HAR. Heed him not; his wicked career is ended, his guilt proved, my innocence proclaimed, my good name restored. He will never harm us more.

DICKS. Officers, do your duty! (*OFFICERS seize RALPH*)

DOMESTICS. What is the meaning of this?

HAR. Friends and neighbours, last Christmas Eve a murder was attempted on this spot. The perpetrator of that fearful deed used a knife which I lost in the snow, and afterwards accused me of the crime. I was borne away to gaol to await my trial, but during the night the body was stolen, and I escaped a murderer's doom. A year flew by ere it turned up, but when it did so this morning life was in it. The victim of that hellish deed stands before you. Let him proclaim the criminal.

DICKS. (*pointing to RALPH*) Ralph Craven, better known as Ralph Waters, he it was who sought my life. I have travelled thousands of miles since that fearful night to proclaim his guilt, and establish the innocence of Harry Manvers.

TOB. Oh Sukey, ain't I glad I didn't pitch him into the sea; if I had I should have been the murderer. I was sober then, thank Heaven!

DICKS. Away with him!

RALPH. One moment, only one. I would do an act of justice ere a prison door closes upon me. Let me speak to her and I will go with you—only let me speak to her!

DICKS. Release him—he cannot escape us now. We will

be more merciful to him than he has been to others. (OFFICERS release RALPH, who walks towards MARY and HARRY, and places his hand in his breast. DICKS presents the pistol at RALPH'S head behind him)

RALPH. Mary Manvers, you are now the possessor of Bamberry Manor, the proud estates I so fondly believed were mine—they are yours—yours by right and birth, (takes a knife from his breast, and springs towards her, raising it above her head) but though I lose them, never for one hour shall you enjoy them. (MARY screams. DICKS fires, RALPH falls, c, DICKS drops on one knee beside him, and raising his arm lets it fall again)

DICKS. The victim was destined by Providence to become the executioner. He is dead. (rises) For this deed I can answer to the law, for justice is not murder. (grasps HARRY's hand) The secret then has been discovered, but the rightful owner holds it in his possession.

MAR. Yes, driven by his villainy from the old homestead, I was about to go forth with only one memento of a spot so dear—a branch of the old holly tree; our friend Toby attempting to break the bough let forth that paper. Ralph tore it from my grasp—the rest you know.

HAR. (takes TOBY's hand) Toby, my kind friend, how can I thank you?

TOB. Ah, farmer! I little thought when you told me not to drink, and refused to let me come after Sukey till I forsook the pot, how bitterly I should curse the sin to which I was addicted. But I have never let liquor pass my lips since that night, for had you been hung I should have felt your death lay at my door, as the cursed drink blinding me permitted the assassin to escape.

HAR. All has turned out perhaps for the best. The innocent are saved—the guilty have perished. Let us take it as the will of Heaven, and not murmur—let us rather bless that Providence which has saved my darling wife from becoming a homeless wanderer in the BITTER COLD—

DICKS. And so strangely revealed the SECRET OF THE HOLLY BOUGH. (Tableau. Snow falls, chimes)

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